

Ida B. Wells-Barnett Biography

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Through the years, there were many people that worked for civil rights. This occurred because there were severe injustices done to the African-Americans just because of their skin color. There were also many people working against sexism to women. Due to efforts of both of these causes, many riots broke out, many innocent people were killed, and many lives were forever changed. Even so, the government did things to both help and hinder the work against sexism and for civil rights. Some famous workers in these causes were Rosa Parks, Abraham Lincoln, and Martin Luther King Jr. but one woman alone started the Civil Rights Movement. All across Illinois, Ida B. Wells-Barnett helped to stop injustice visited upon African-Americans, such as lynchings and lack of fair trials, through her career as a powerful writer.

The main topic that Wells wrote and researched was the countless lynchings that took place across the state, and the country, and about how these lynchings were, “a systematic attempt to subordinate the black community”. She took time to study all the lynchings that happened across the state and across the nation for the years 1892, 1893, and 1894. In 1894 alone, 132 people were executed in the United States due to the law, and 197 others were killed by mobs without a chance for a fair trial. Furthermore, she found out that 728 executions through lynchings alone happened in the 10 years prior to 1894. Through her research, she also took time to write and tell the public about the things she uncovered. She ended up writing numerous articles, books, and pamphlets that were available to the public. Many whites were angered at the articles claiming those

lynched were innocent, while many African-Americans were glad to see truth spread through the community. The most common allegation, she found, was that African-American men were raping white women. Through more detailed research, Wells found that the blame should actually be put on the women in the first place. The women in these interracial relationships were usually the one to encourage or even start it. If the woman was not the one accusing the man of the rape, then it would be resentful men. Some men were jealous, hateful, or even sickened by the idea that their white women would be attracted to African-American men. Once the man was accused, if he was lucky, he would get a chance for a trial. On many occasions though a mob would be led to the accused and would be lynched. Even if law officials found out, no one would be sent to help the man. Wells also found three facts that were most disturbing to her. In truth, only one third of the rapes actually happened. Also, during the not so long ago civil war, women and children would be left at home, alone with slaves, as their men went off to war. Through this time, rape had been virtually unknown, yet now it was happening very often. Lastly, white men frequently assaulted African-American women, yet any affair at all between a white woman and an African-American man was considered rape. In addition to those lynched for rapes, there were still many other reasons an African-American could be lynched. No one was safe from this horror, as a thirteen-year old girl named Mildrey Brown was lynched on circumstantial evidence that she poisoned a white baby. Another common situation was for an African-American business man to be lynched. Most times there was no crime committed, but whites did not want to let the other men be successful. Three of Wells' own friends that were business men were lynched for crimes they did not commit. In the end, Wells concluded that these lynchings

were intended murder. Many were on circumstantial evidence or did not get fair trials because lawyers refused to serve African-Americans. Just as many times, the accused would not even get a chance at a fair trial. News of the incident would be leaked to the public, which would then form a mob to go lynch the “criminal” themselves. Wells wrote, “It becomes the painful duty of the negro to reproduce a record which shows that a large portion of the American people avow anarchy, condone murder, and defy the contempt of civilization”. She believed that men, women, and children were being intentionally murdered to scare the public and suppress the advancement of African-Americans since slavery.

All across Illinois, Ida B. Wells-Barnett helped to stop injustice visited upon African-Americans, such as unfair lynchings and lack of fair trials, through her career as a powerful writer. Many more people could have been killed unfairly had she not devoted her life to researching the countless lynchings. Also due to her efforts, many African-Americans’ lives improved greatly through the NAACP and the NACW. Her acts started many people in motion to end something that had gone on since the original English settlements. Her writing encouraged many more people to speak out against the unfortunate events happening in their lives. Luckily, people that are not as hindered as those of the past were. Thanks to Ida B. Wells-Barnett, the world today is much better than it had been. [From Dennis Brindell Fradin and Judith Bloom Fradin, *Ida B. Wells*; Vincent Franklin, *Living Our Stories, Telling Out Truths*; Ida B. Wells.

<http://www.idabwells.org/About_IdaBWells/IdBWellsBiography.htm> (Sep. 21, 2008); Mississippi Writer’s Page. <<http://www.demiss.edu/mwp/dir/wells->

barnett_ida/index.html > (Sep. 15, 2008); and Elizabeth Van Steewyk, *Ida B. Wells-Barnett*.]